AST Century City 2000

If performance isn't your only consideration, then this USB-only system is worth considering.

ANOTHER LATE ARRIVAL FOR OUR MAIN feature, the AST Century City 2000 is aimed at home users who aren't too concerned with high-end performance. The 500MHz Celeron processor with 64MB RAM doesn't offer outstanding power, achieving a Business Winstone 99 score of 16.6 in our February edition First Looks review. This compares poorly with the other machines in our budget PC section and there's no price benefit to the Century City. The RAM can be upgraded to a maximum of 512MB, but you won't be able to do this yourself, as all upgrades have to be carried out by an AST dealer.

However, if you are looking for a unit which is small, lightweight and can be set up with the minimum amount of hassle, then the AST Century City 2000 may have something to offer.

The graphics output might not impress serious gamers, but the maximum resolution of 1600 by 1200 at 256 colours, or 1024 by 768 at 24-bit colour, should prove adequate for most other tasks.

An 8.4GB Samsung Ultra ATA/66 hard disk drive provides plenty of internal storage, but you'll have to invest in a USB drive if you need to store files on removeable media. The software bundle is limited to Microsoft Works Suite 99, which may not keep the family amused for long.

Providing you're not looking for outstanding performance, the AST Century City has several points in its favour. Its small footprint and minimal running noise make the AST a good choice for home use; and the price is reasonable.

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Price as reviewed (inc. VAT) £899
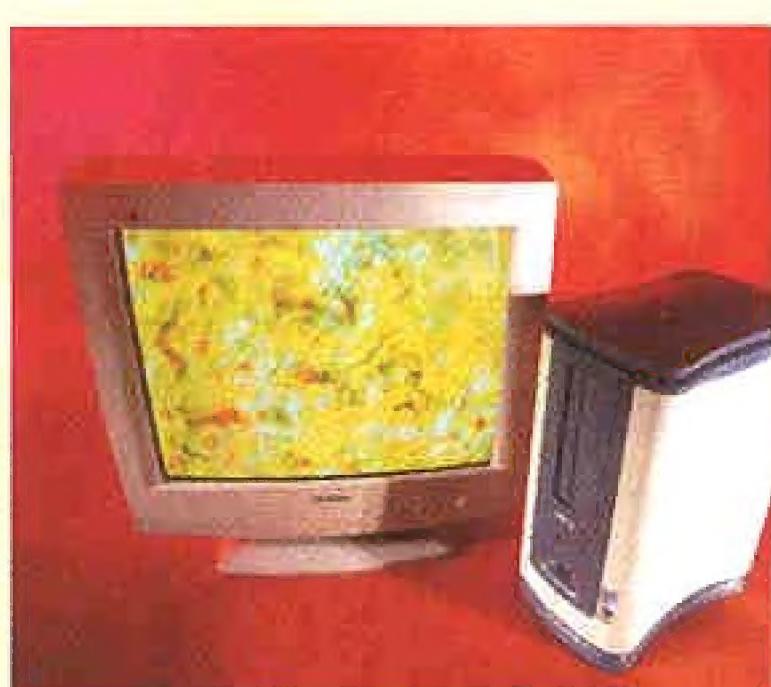
Atlas Meridian 450

Pros Very inexpensive; good build quality.
Cons Limited expansion possibilities.
Verdict The cheapest system in this section, this is a good choice for a budget home computer.

Price as reviewed (inc. VAT) £606

THE ATLAS MERIDIAN 450 OFFERS good value for money and is a great choice for anyone seeking a basic computer, as it's suitable for its likely target market looking for an inexpensive second machine.

This mini-tower case design has clean lines and there are four drive bays. One 5.25in. bay is used for the TEAC CD-540E 40x speed CD-ROM drive and both of the 3.5in. bays are used by the floppy disk drive and the 7.9GB Fujitsu MPE3084AE Ultra ATA/66 hard disk drive.

Looking inside at the Asus P5A-VM ATX motherboard—based on an Ali Aladdin chipset—you'll find: an AMD K6-3 450 CPU; an ESS ES1938 AudioDrive chip; and an integrated ATI RageIIc chip with 4MB of memory. There are two unoccupied ISA expansion slots and one of the three PCI slots is taken up by the Diamond SupraSST 56i Pro DF 56K modem. One of the PCI slot blanking plates is used by the game port, which could have been fitted in one of the cut-outs on the backplate.

Acer's plain but functional keyboard has a sticker on it, showing the Freephone help line for Atlas, and is paired with a standard Logitech wheel-mouse. The ADI VD695B 15in. monitor gives a reasonable picture at its optimum resolution of 800 by 600.

Along with Windows 98SE, the software bundle includes a useful copy of Lotus SmartSuite Millennium. This should be able to take care of most office needs.

The Atlas Meridian 450 doesn't have any flourishes, but it is a well-balanced budget system and is good value for money.

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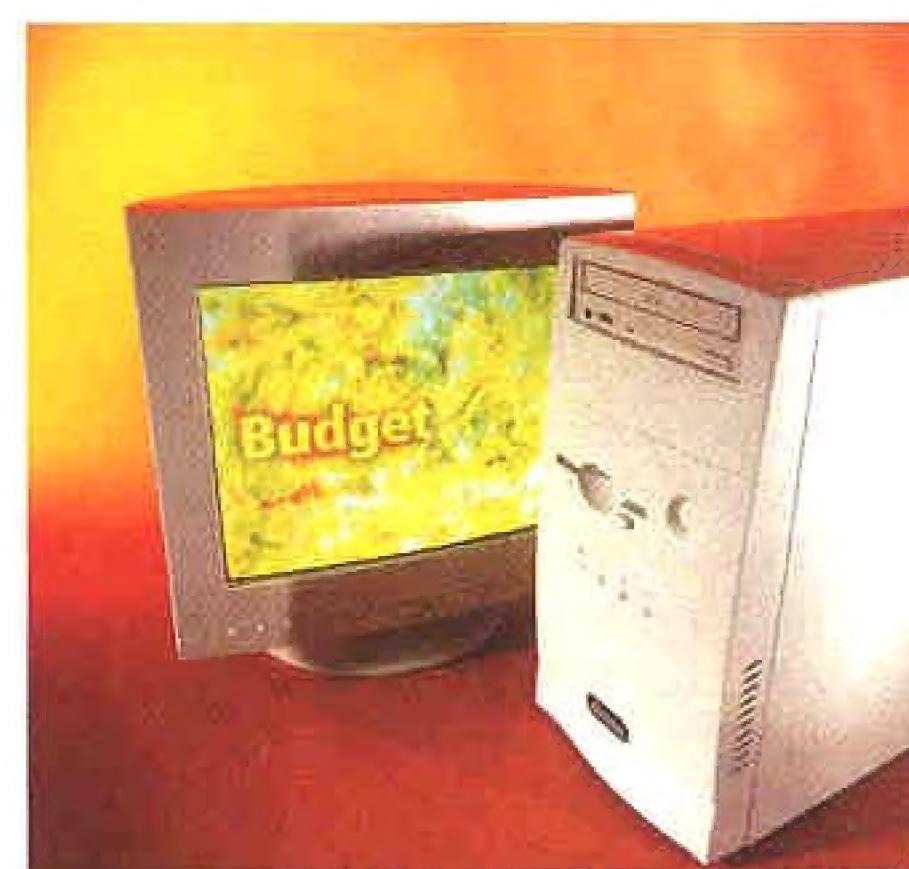
Big Red Mercury 500

Pros Plenty of room for expansion; AGP slot; inexpensive.
Cons Poor performance.
Verdict Low price and upgradeable graphics make this an appealing choice.

Price as reviewed (inc. VAT) £704

THE BIG RED MERCURY 500'S UNINspiring performance is balanced by a good set of features, making it good value for money if you're looking for a budget minitower system which offers room to grow.

EPoX provides the EP-MVP3G-M motherboard with a VIA MVP3 chipset supporting the 500MHz AMD K6-2 processor and 64MB of SDRAM. Overall performance is dragged down by the slow S3 Trio3D/2X AGP graphics, but this could always be upgraded. The CTX VL510 15in. is adequate for the task and has a simple control interface. A plastic door covers the four front-accessible 5.25in. drive bays, one taken up by the Creative Labs 48-speed CD4834E CD-ROM drive. There are three 3.5in. drive bays: the standard floppy disk drive occupies one; an 8GB Seagate ST38410A hard disk drive another.

An OEM 56K modem takes up one of the five PCI slots and both ISA slots are free, giving plenty of scope for upgrades. There's only a single serial port, but the two USB ports help offset this. Audio is integrated, with a Crystal (SM) 32 sound chip attached to the three audio ports at the rear. The bundled software includes: Lotus Smartsuite Millennium; Bodyworks; IBM ViaVoice 98; CA BitWare; McAfee VirusScan Classic; and a couple of games. One year's on-site warranty is also included.

The Big Red Mercury 500 is no scorcher, but it's a system well worth looking at if you want a good, value-for-money machine which can be easily expanded.

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